

2020 Premier’s Curriculum Transition Scholarship

Future Directions in Curriculum Transition

An investigation into curriculum transition programs and strategies utilised in Australia

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# Introduction

In 2020 I was fortunate enough to receive the NSW Premier’s Curriculum Transition Scholarship. I applied for this scholarship because I am passionate about developing strong relationships with local schools and key stakeholders to ensure a positive transition experience from primary to secondary school for students. On the flip side, I’ve observed how students can experience difficult transitions, leading to disengagement, reduced self-confidence, negative attitudes and decreased motivation. My desire to study various curriculum transition frameworks within Australia has enabled me to share some invaluable insights and strategies. I believe with appropriate preparation, planning and support from teachers and key stakeholders, all students can potentially be part of an effective curriculum transition.

From this study tour, it is clear that essential for a smooth transition from primary to secondary school are strategies and programs that guide students through this journey. Equally important are resources and programs that support parents, caregivers, teachers, and friends, as they typically include the immediate support network for transitioning students.

Across the state, there are many limitations on transition programs including a lack of consistency and standards. I believe implementing standard and consistent transition strategies and resources in NSW, could improve student outcomes. The benefits could positively influence students' long-term well-being, emotional resilience, engagement in learning, and academic achievement.

# Focus of Study

My study tour aimed to explore and investigate successful pedagogical practices to ensure a smooth curriculum transition for NSW students moving from primary to secondary school. This study utilised various methodologies to discover contributors to a successful transition and identify factors that increase the risk of a difficult transition. Poor adjustment to secondary school has been associated with disengagement and non-completion, which leads to a raft of poor outcomes, such as low self-esteem and later in life limited employment opportunities (Zeedyk et al. 2003 & Hanewald, 2013).

Although it is known that transition can profoundly alter the school experience, less is known about how children, young people, their families, and teachers perceive transition and how it alters their educational trajectory. Further aims of my study tour were to identify practical methods that focus on enhancing the experience of transition, particularly from primary to secondary school and to describe and unpack how and why transition strategies are critical.

I endeavoured to observe the current state of curriculum transition across various public and independent schools within Australia.

My professional learning has enabled me to analyse and recommend appropriate and best practice strategies by utilising methodologies including interviews, observing programs, and pedagogical practice across various Australian schools. The importance of sharing the greater benefits that curriculum transition programs can have on students’ lives and the strategies teachers and leaders can implement will hope to achieve positive student outcomes.

# Significant Learning

The scope of my study tour included meeting with schools, students, and educators from the Central Coast New South Wales, Gold Coast Queensland, Tasmania, and Perth Western Australia.

Before exploring the significant learning around curriculum transition it is important to define and understand the topic. Curriculum has a valuable role to play in a student’s transition from primary to secondary school and in this study, “curriculum” encompasses the entirety of the student experience of, and engagement with learning. “Curriculum” also includes the social, academic, and support programs related to the student’s experience (Waters, Lester & Cross, 2014). Furthermore, the term “curriculum transition” expresses this broad view and relates to the teaching, assessing, and learning aspects for both students and teachers during this phase. How well students cope and engage with curriculum transition to secondary school can have ongoing implications for their emotional and academic development (NSW DET, 2017). The transition from primary to secondary usually occurs at age 11-13 in NSW and typically coincides with the social and biological changes that occur during adolescent development (Howard & Johnson, 2004). Existing research indicates there are ongoing issues in NSW schools with a minority of students not managing the transition process effectively (NSW DET, 2017). This can result in a decrease in student academic achievement associated with a loss of confidence about the ability to handle the work at the secondary level. Research has also measured a widening of existing gaps in educational achievement (Smith, 2008).

The following mentioned programs, strategies and resources aim to encourage discussion and aid schools to effect positive transition outcomes whilst also providing students with transferable skills to manage other forms of change or uncertainty that will occur throughout their lives.

Many school transition programs have a single and relatively narrow focus. Essential components of a transition model are: developing a planning team, generating goals and identifying problems, developing a written transition plan, acquiring the support of all those involved in the transition process and evaluating the process (Anderson et.al 2000).

### Focus on Communication and Collaborative Planning

Surveying students was interesting as they provided a rich insight into the world of primary to secondary transition through honest responses and the lived experiences they brought to our conversations. Various schools and teachers generously gave their time to facilitate focus groups into their ever-so-busy learning environments. Brief but valid parent input was also important as they often had insight into the student's lived experiences. Students had varied feelings regarding the transition process to high school. While some were content or excited about it, others expressed concerns and uncertainties. Emotions were often mixed, with individual students experiencing a range of feelings related to different aspects of their transition. Common factors influencing emotional responses, both positive and challenging, were academic expectations (level and workload), understanding new high school systems/classes, and the social/relationship domain. What was interesting was how students offered numerous suggestions to address potential challenges, with a focus on school adjustments and mentoring to improve the transition experience. Additionally, students emphasised their desire to take an active role in solving problems and being agents of change and improvement now they were in high school and wanted greater autonomy and independence.

Miami State High School offers a program that effectively aids students in transitioning into high school and supports them during their early years and beyond. Executive Principal Michelle Flynn reported how the program has gained regional recognition for its impressive educational outcomes.

This initiative, known as the "Ready, Set, Reach for the Stars" program, focuses on preparing students before they start Year 7, with extensive ongoing collaboration between primary feeder schools (including multiple face-to-face meetings), offering targeted support during orientation, and continuously monitoring and aiding their development throughout their junior years. The components of the program include:

* **Ready:** Prepares students through collaborative planning and support before they enter Year 7. A key feature is that high school teachers and key executive personnel meet with each Year 6 primary teacher from feeder schools, to discuss incoming students and plan relevant and appropriate support. This critical face-to-face communication and collaborative sharing of key information helps to devise additional support strategies that may not come about from a standard ‘enrolment or transition form’ that has limitations.
* **Set:** Miami provides orientation programs and targeted interventions for both academic and welfare needs including top streaming academic ‘STELLA’ classes and smaller groups for support classes.
* **Reach for the Stars:** Teachers continue to support and track each student's progress throughout their junior school years and further into later transition points.

A unique feature of the program is that Year 7 students who started in the previous year, share exciting opportunities that await incoming transition students through videos, presentations and discussion groups. These are shared with Year 6 students throughout the year to increase familiarity.

The Hutchins School, Hobart provides multiple transition days (similar to orientation days), planned for Term Four, with Year 6 to offer students two days experiencing life as a Secondary School student. During these days, they participate in classes, meet teachers and peers, and become acquainted with the Secondary School setting. The purpose of these days are to foster a sense of belonging and alleviate initial worries. Having more than one day helps promote a sense of belonging and familiarity with the school environment.

### Focus on Building Relationships

Launceston Grammar provides students with a ‘Grade 7 Transition Programme’. This allows students to go on camp in the second week of school. This is purely a focus on a transition camp, with comments from students describing it as ‘a really fun way to get to know everyone and make friends. I only knew a handful of people and going there I was so nervous, it was a really good bonding experience to do at the start of the year’.

A benefit to holding the transition camp at the beginning of the year - students feel more connected in forming relationships, confident and feel ready for the challenges of secondary school. The School also supports Grade 7 students by way of a purpose-built learning zone. The 'Log Cabin' is specifically made to address the developmental needs of young adolescents, offering a welcoming and nurturing environment to support transition. This initiative gently introduces students to the broader experiences of secondary school. A well-established tradition, it has helped to enhance parental involvement in secondary school life and facilitate a seamless transition for students to the Senior Campus. Grade 7 students also have a designated class teacher who is responsible for their welfare and is trained and aware of the new challenges that the secondary years bring. The Grade 7 teaching team lead regular 'Town Hall' meetings in the undercover area to share information, celebrate successes and discuss the expectations that they have for students. The idea of building relationships by having a ‘main class/home room or core subject teacher’ allows students to build positive relationships with this support teacher.

### Focus on Independence and Building Resilience

Henry Kendall High School on the Central Coast, unique with its own Middle School, encourages students to take an active role in their transition to high school. Henry Kendall uses a range of strategies to help foster a school environment where students feel empowered to take initiative and contribute to their education and well-being, thereby enhancing their transition experience and overall school life.

1. **Peer Mentoring Programs:** Incoming students are paired with older students who have successfully navigated their first year of high school. These peer mentors offer advice, share their experiences, and provide support, empowering new students to manage their challenges more effectively. They are also provided with ongoing meeting opportunities (not just the initial ‘orientation style’ sessions).
2. **Student-Led Workshops:** Students discuss common challenges and brainstorm solutions. There are sessions on time management, study skills, and navigating social dynamics. Allowing previous students to lead these workshops enhances a sense of opportunity and responsibility to incoming students.
3. **Feedback and Reflection Sessions:** There are sessions where students can reflect on their experiences and provide feedback on what is working and what isn’t. I think this is a key component of a successful transition program.
4. **Additional Support Groups in the ‘STAR’ program:** Additional smaller student groups are created to address specific issues they identify with, such as increased anxiety around transition and/or individual learning needs. These groups work in collaboration with specialist support staff and trained peer support students to move through intervention and social skills programs to feel supported and ready to transition to high school. They look at areas such as conflict resolution, leadership, and effective communication. Equipping students with these skills can help them tackle personal and academic challenges more confidently.
5. **Independence in Learning:** Teachers incorporate elements of choice within their curriculum, utilising project-based learning within their middle school environment. Allowing students to pursue their interests within the academic framework can help them feel more engaged and capable of directing their learning.

Another great strategy the Hutchins School involves is offering elective options to students right from the start of Year 7. This initiative is aimed at assisting both students and parents to be more excited during this transition time by making elective subjects available to Year 7 students. It empowers students to pursue their interests and make educated decisions about their academic path. With the aim to develop well-rounded individuals, electives play a crucial role in that process.

### Monitor, Assess and Adapt

For schools to sustain an effective transition program, it is crucial that they have confidence in their approach, can measure success, and are willing to assess and adapt over time. Schools that were visited showcased a preference for collaborative, inquiry-based learning programs, which are essential for engaging students during these transitional phases.

Henry Kendall High School utilizes innovative strategies allowing students to have a voice in the planning and execution of transition programs. This empowers students by involving them directly in decisions that affect their educational journey, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement.

As students progress through various transition points, such as from primary to secondary or from junior to senior secondary, the need for additional resources and dedicated support becomes evident. These resources should help students navigate the "unknown" elements of school life, building on their emerging sense of responsibility and agency. Furthermore, materials that focus on relevant topics important during different transition stages can enhance student engagement and participation in school.

The Hutchins School in Hobart, Tasmania, for example, has established ongoing transition programs that are integral to their educational framework. Mike from the Hutchins School shared insights into their Character Development Programs, which include activities like the Year 7 Father/Significant Male Mentor and Son Camps. These camps, facilitated by the Rites of Passage Institute and dedicated staff, are designed to support boys and their families as they transition from childhood to adulthood, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in guiding young men through significant life changes.

Carly Brien, the Educator Rising Star teacher of 2017, teaching in Perth, focuses on bridging the gap between primary and high school teaching methods. She oversees innovative programs in Year 7 that facilitate a seamless transition for students from primary to high school. These programs are cross-curricular and differentiated, catering to various learning styles and diverse student needs. Carly is also a leader of Peer Collaborative Learning, a method where teachers observe one another and collaborate to enhance their pedagogical approaches within the middle school setting collaborating with the primary setting and vice versa. Her leadership has spearheaded a shift towards Middleschool Project-Based Learning, redefining programs to emphasise critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication.

To continually improve the effectiveness of curriculum transition programs, monitoring and evaluating them through surveys of teachers and students both before and after implementation is essential. Carly diligently assesses and monitors the outcomes of their transition strategies to ensure they meet the evolving needs of the students and the educational community. This ongoing evaluation helps identify areas for improvement, ensuring that the transition programs remain responsive and effective.

# Conclusion

This report has examined experiences of young people transitioning from primary to secondary school, highlighting the critical nature of this phase and the various factors influencing their experience. The findings underscore the importance of well-designed and executed transition programs that benefit students, families, and school staff. This report will enhance awareness and understanding of diverse strategies and programs that can ease the challenges faced during this educational phase.

It is recommended that schools implement a structured program that supports the emotional, social, and academic well-being of students at multiple transition points throughout their schooling. Drawing on the insights gained from this enriching experience, I have reevaluated our current school practices and programs through a new lens. Developing our transition programs based on evidence-based practices is essential for laying a strong foundation to improve student outcomes.

Fostering greater collaboration among stakeholders and increasing parental engagement are crucial for successful transitions. Proposed strategies for engaging important stakeholders include:

* **Focus on Communication and Collaborative Planning:** Enhance collaboration between primary and secondary schools to ensure smoother transitions. Very close links between primary and secondary school teachers are found to be essential for successful transitions (Green [1997](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40894-017-0063-2#ref-CR11); Jindale-Snape and; Miller [2008](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40894-017-0063-2#ref-CR13)).
* **Focus on Independence and Building Resilience:** Encourage parental involvement to support the development of independence and resilience in students. Building programs and strategies that build resilience for change.
* **Focus on Monitoring, Assessing, and Adapting:** Continuously assess transition programs and adapt based on feedback and observed outcomes.

Since returning from the tour, I have shared my findings through presentations to school staff, Facebook groups, regional networks, and school-level discussions. I am thankful to the Premier’s Department and the NSW government for the opportunity to delve into this interesting subject. This exploration has unveiled effective strategies and a variety of promising approaches for addressing transition challenges.

The knowledge acquired from this tour inspires ongoing improvements to our school's practices. By developing a secondary transition scope and sequence that includes activities grounded in evidence-based practices and predictors, we aim to establish a robust framework for enhancing student outcomes. Ultimately, the implementation of effective curriculum transition strategies has the potential to significantly improve students' long-term well-being, emotional resilience, engagement in learning, and academic achievement.

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